

THE ETERNAL NOW

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WHAT THE MYSTIC

MEANS BY THE

"ETERNAL NOW"

A TALK TO STUDENTS

BY

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FOREWORD

THIS talk was originally given to a circle of advanced students, and was not issued to the general public, being on a subject not likely to attract them. The matter is now being discussed on lines that were exclusively Theosophical when this was delivered, but that have now spread to the thoughtful among the public. Hence it is now published for the first time, as a contribution to the public discussion.

ANNIE BESANT

What the Mystic means by the "Eternal Now"¹

It is hardly possible to take up a more difficult and obscure subject than that chosen for this morning, and I have been trying to think of the best way in which to put it before you. I have been urged to explain it, to give some idea of what we mean by this constantly repeated term, and I will try to make it more intelligible. But it is very difficult, for there is so much of sight, which is then mixed up by the seer with the thoughts within his own mind. I have been trying as hard as possible to separate off these elements by observing my own consciousness, and I will try to describe what is seen, and to separate it off from what is thought in connection with what is seen, so that, to some extent at least, I shall put before you separately the vision which is observed, and the deductions drawn from it by the mystic.

Now as a rule this is not done, and what you are given by the seer, by the mystic, is a mixture. The person who has the vision pours it all out—what he sees, what he thinks, what he puts into the vision—all in one stream. Obviously *you* cannot disentangle it; you have no means of distinguishing clearly what

¹ A Talk to Students, July 16, 1905.

he has seen, and what he has thought ; only the man himself can do it.

I found the process more difficult than I expected when I began to try to do it. I am not sure even now that I shall not convey to you more confusion than the ultimate clearness I myself obtained in the matter. For it is hard to translate the experience of one plane into a language belonging to another, and the word which is seized on, as the nearest equivalent on the physical plane for that which is seen on the higher, is more often misleading than illuminative, because of its connotations, all of which are, naturally, plunged into it by the hearer. The things that colour one's own ideas most are the hardest to put into words, because this colour is often due to a sensing of something beyond, which is too subtle to be seen, and is not on the plane where the mind definitely outlines the thought which it is taking into intelligible form which it can comprehend. There is a difference, in that there are some things that you sense, but while you sense them you do not see their outline, so that you get rather a sensing than a thought, still less a thought-form.

These three elements are present, as factors in the vision of the mystic, but they are not, as a rule, recognised by him as factors :

- (1) That which is looked at, the fact on another plane,
- (2) That which is read into the fact by the thought of the seer, by the previous experience he has gathered, largely on the

physical plane, and which is the normal content of his consciousness.

- (3) That which he senses beyond his thinking, beyond his sight, beyond his possibility of putting into clear thought, much less clear language.

As far as I am able to distinguish, that last, the subtlest and most elusive, is the most important of all, but the most difficult to explain when you are trying to be clear and definite. Anyone who has tried to analyse his own consciousness will understand what I mean by this. That which is not definitely thought, but is sensed, is that which one feels inwardly to be at once the most important and the most impossible of expression. Hence the continual use by the mystic of terms such as "ineffable," "inconceivable," "inexpressible," etc., which merely show that he cannot say what he means, and is struggling helplessly with facts too big for him. I am inclined to believe that Those who stand at much higher stages often experience difficulties in expressing to Their pupils what They themselves clearly know. For They oft-times leave Their students to work out matters for themselves without explanation, saying merely : " You will understand presently." And that is to me profoundly satisfactory, although some seem to feel it as disheartening ; to me the most disheartening thing of all would be to think that we see the end of things, we with our petty intellects and limited powers. How much more inspiring is it to feel that there are myriads of things, far beyond our present grasping, that one day

we shall know ; that God's universe is " ineffably " larger, grander, more profound, more sublime, than we can grasp to-day.

To begin with, it seems to me that what is called the " Eternal Now " is a concept of the Pure Reason, and not a matter of vision at all ; that it is deduced from certain experiences which we try to describe, but is not in those experiences, for the simple reason that it is truly beyond the senses, and beyond the mind. It is meant to mean the whole, the eternal, changeless, unconditioned, the Nirguna Brahman. That is clearly beyond the reach of any mystic—though the Logoi may have a much clearer idea of it than we can have, down here in the mud.

The " Eternal Now " is quite a natural deduction for the mystic from the things which he does see, and it is these things with which we are immediately concerned for the moment.

He sees parts of pictures which exist, most often in the mind of the Planetary Logos, sometimes in the mind of the Logos of the system, and according to his own height of development, or the pictures which are shown to him for his help and for the synthesising of his thought, will be his conception of the things in the divine Mind of which he catches glimpses and reflections.

Now these glimpses to him appear in the form of simultaneous pictures, in which there is neither past, present, nor future, in which he is unable to distinguish any indication as to past, present, or future, except by fixing his attention on one object in the

picture, and then using his knowledge, outside of his immediate vision, to say where that object would fit in, in evolution. As far as his direct vision goes it is a picture at which he gazes, in which he seems to see everything at one and the same time; yet he necessarily sees only a fragment. That fragment may be large or small; he may take in more or less, but it is only a fragment of a stupendous picture, and this fragment makes upon his mind the impression that all he sees is simultaneous—that it exists all at the same time in the mind of the Being at which he is looking—in the mind, because it is a glimpse of the mind of the Planetary Logos; and the same may be repeated higher up.

Suppose then, for a moment, that we try to picture something of what may be seen by a mystic in the mind of the Planetary Logos with regard to His own Chain. This gives a picture of thoughts which may be seen either as Ideas or as thought-forms; and by this distinction I mean: that if you are looking at thought-forms you see a simultaneous picture of objects at all stages of evolution, while if you are looking at the next stage upwards, the world of Ideas—Ideas as distinguished from thought-forms—then the Idea is more of what we have sometimes called an archetype, that is, not of all forms as worked out in evolution, but as generative ideas, ideas generating on the lower planes distinct forms which in their turn evolve.

Take the lower plane—that of thought-forms; that is a definite picture in which, if I may so phrase it, there are three *strata*,

One, the picture of the forms that actually exist in the mind of the Planetary Logos, and will exist in evolution—definite and clear; in that is everything that will come into existence in that universe with which He is concerned—the particular Chain. It is only one Chain I am thinking of, our own.

That may be said to be a sort of surface picture, in which most plainly stand out beginnings and endings, and between the beginnings and endings the second layer shows itself through. This second layer is a second picture, which I can only distinguish by saying that it looks a little bit dimmer; it is not less seen, but it is rather dimmer than the other, and that contains the possibilities that are workable out in that universe. These are far more numerous than those that are worked out, and they may be called by the observer all "conceivable" things; that seems to form the second *stratum*.

Then there is a third *stratum*, a third picture, more shadowy still, of possibilities that are not possibilities; and by that paradoxical phrase I mean things that might be conceived as possibilities, but which are not within the limits of that particular universe, so that they could not be worked out in that universe, but might be worked out in some other evolution.

These possible possibilities, and impossible possibilities, are in shadowy relation to the first clear picture, which is that of forms that are worked out.

That is something of what the mystic actually sees when he is trying to make out what is in that

Mind of the thought-forms. There are three layers of pictures which do not lose the sense of being immediately present, and the three layers are distinguishable by a greater or lesser sharpness of outline. It is as though round the clear outline there were a cloud containing the possibilities which might be worked out in that evolution, and round that a third cloud containing the possibilities not to be worked out in that universe.

Suppose we take, for a moment, what is seen as a definite picture—then we ask what is the next stage of that picture? What happens with it? And we find that these thought-forms are slowly produced in matter of the lower planes, but they are produced one after another, not simultaneously; so that we get what is called evolution, successive happenings, and that evolution goes on in a very peculiar way, which I will try to sketch out for you.

Speaking generally, evolution is merely the successive densifying of the thought-forms, and is by no means the work of the Logos all by Himself. There is where a great deal of apparent difficulty of vision first comes in, because the whole thing changes while you are looking at it; and when you come down to the bringing of these things into successive materialisations, it seems as though it were not the work of the Logos Himself as it was at first seen. The work of the Logos, complete on its own plane, becomes more and more complicated by the incorporation into it of a number of other wills—and these cause the possible possibilities—the wills of the Builders, Devas and

human beings, in all of whom the mānasic quality is developed to a greater or lesser extent, and, with it, the individualisation of choice and of activity.

In connection with this bringing down of thoughts and thought-forms, remember that these are not the thought-forms of our lower mānasic plane, but of a very much higher plane, corresponding to the lofty evolution of the Planetary Logos; there is a great pouring out of life from the archetypal world—the world of *His* thought-forms—that other great picture which exists in His consciousness, and which is, to us at present, so hopelessly bewildering.

The materialisation of these, for Globe *A* of the Chain, appears to be the work of the Builders—those lofty Devas who do not belong to this system at all, but who, the product of other world-systems, are brought over by the Logos of the system, and come out from Him for the shaping of this one. This appears to be their work, which in the first place is synthesising work, in which they gather out of those great ideas in the mind of the Logos—with whom they co-operate—what they see to be ruling principles underlying this immense diversification of forms, and shape those into the expression which we call archetypes of our Chain, and these appear on the higher part of the mānasic plane in due course, on Globe *A*, after coming down through the ātmic and buddhic planes.

These archetypal forms are shaped by the Builders, and, as far as one is able to tell, they are deliberately formed by a process of synthesis from the

thought-forms in the mind of the Planetary Logos Himself. The method is totally incomprehensible to me, as one only sees the result—that the forms appear out of the hands of the Builders; I do not understand how.

So that we may take it, the whole process of evolution has been the bringing down of group after group of ideas into the lower planes, where they necessarily show forth succession in time, and also bringing them down in relation to each other, so that they come into the space world in that succession in time; rather, in that succession we have what we call time. Certain time-measures have been imposed on the system by the thought of the Logos, measures of the relation of the Sun to worlds in the system and the vast cycles, and therefore have the nature of objectivity about them; and there are other time-measures, imposed by the thought of the Planetary Logos, as the measures due to the relative positions of the moon and the earth, and the smaller cycles. Apart from these, time is simply a succession in consciousness to the Jiva, while space is simply the direction for him of surrounding things—each Jiva being the centre for his own space world. To him things exist in relation to himself. That seems to be what underlies his perception of what he calls space, and the order in which they appear to him makes for him what he calls time, with the addition of that imposition on him of certain measures of time which are the thought-forms of the great Logos Himself, and of the

Planetary Logos. Hence the easiness with which our time disappears on the higher planes.

Leaving that for a moment, let me go back to those possibilities which may find expression within the universe. It is here that there comes in the difficulty of entanglement in one's own thoughts in looking at the picture. That is why mystics give us so often their own conclusions, instead of the picture itself.

When one looks at the world of objects, there are two things that are seen—what we call beginnings and endings, and then there is the between. To some extent one may read that "between" into the picture, because in the sight of any particular Round one sees on Globe *A* certain archetypal forms which contain within them all the possibilities which are going to be worked out during the Round, and one sees on Globe *G* those possibilities worked out—the perfected forms of those which are germinal on Globe *A*.

It is not possible to get the one out of the mind in looking at the other; the "Now" comes with the picture where the whole thing is seen simultaneously, but in attempting to analyse parts of the picture with the limited vision, one does, I think, impose upon this the experience gathered on lower planes, and how it looks to the Logos it is obviously quite impossible for us to say. We can quite imagine—it is imagination only—that in His mind, looking at it, so to speak, from behind, the whole of the things that look to us as "between," are making to Him part of His "Now," while to us they are distinctly between beginnings and endings.

A curious and interesting point arises with regard to that "between". In the whole of the course of the throwing down of this great simultaneous picture into the succession that we call evolution, a large number of other partially developed wills come in and work. Fundamentally they are a part of the Logos and all inhere in Him, so that it is all His will. That is one of the things that one dimly senses. Each of these individual wills is definitely His will, but each develops in itself more and more of apparently separate intention and separate execution as it works in the developing Monads which are there unfolding. These different paths that they try to make out for themselves are all His paths—"all paths are mine"; that is clear; but it is equally clear that they take one path or another as each separate will chooses, that spontaneity of action being of their own inherent divinity which cannot be eliminated by anything from outside. Only He, as one Logos, is working directly in them in the earlier stages, while He, as His separate portions, is working in their individual natures in the later stages, and these show out His diversity more and more in these later stages; so that when we take a number of individual Jivas and try to follow them throughout, we find in the lower kingdoms that they are being moved entirely by the Great Will which carries them along with it, and we find, as they pass into the higher kingdoms, that that Will makes itself less manifest in its unity and more in its diversity, as though the separate wills branched out from His. It is all His specifically,

but theirs show themselves as more and more separate, like branches from a trunk, although in a limited way. Now the way they show, I can tell you as part of the seeing ; and the conclusions I make as to how they do it come as part of my own thinking upon it.

We must separate "objects" and "events," for a fresh element enters into events. The vision of the objects is the triple vision explained, of the actual, the possibility, and the impossibility in this universe, but possible elsewhere. It is in these possible possibilities that the Jivas, whether in the human or the Deva kingdoms, find so much scope for their activity and for their individual unfolding in evolution. In the "Now" of the Logos we have the beginnings and endings and those cloudy possibilities between, and in that cloud of possibilities, looked at more closely in evolution, we see individual Jivas trying this way and the other way, succeeding and failing, and a large number of those possibilities come into actuality, not by direct action of the Logos, but by the indirect action of the Jivas.

It is as though He were trying, through them all, all these different ways. If one tries to get away from the Jivas, and to see the difference between what they are trying, or He is trying through them, one is dimly conscious on His part of a kind of large sweet contempt as to the ways. They are all equally good to Him, all His ways.

If one tries to get away from that into the consciousness of the individual Jiva, then one sees the

success and the failures, the comings up and down, backwards and forwards, where the will, limited by the various vehicles of the Jivas, tries this, that, and every way of attaining a certain end.

The end cannot be changed in the great plan, but the way of reaching it seems to be subject to innumerable minor plans. The Will behind seems to be working equally in all. What we see depends on what we are watching. If we are trying to get rid of the individual Jiva and to see the other, we see it spreading out in all directions and always winning its way, just as though it were a loop dropping down and going up again and always coming to the same point at the end.

The loop is like a web, but whether the individual Jiva goes along one line of the web, or another, does not seem to matter. The Jiva is constrained to a certain end, but, in order that he may unfold his powers, is left extraordinarily free with regard to the means by which that end is attained. He is limited again—he cannot do the unworkable possibilities of the universe. But within the possibilities of the universe how numerous are the possibilities from which to choose.

Then there is that strange fact, sure but not readily comprehensible, that the future influences the past.

When we try to understand what that means, and to grasp the truth that the life of the Jiva is a very wonderful whole which cannot be dislocated, and that that which is the aim of his special evolution is an influence which works through the whole of it, we

see that, in a mysterious, i.e., not understood, way, that which he will be influences that which he is.

Hence, if we take a Monad at the beginning and ending, we cannot help having it forced on the mind that that which is at the end contains everything on the way towards the end. The object therefore of this evolution does influence the ways he treads in the course of his evolution. The whole is a great circle, and every part influences every other part, while "past" and "future" depend on the point at which you place yourself in the circle. That is what is meant, I think, by the somewhat apocalyptic saying that "the future influences the past"; anyhow, it is clear that it does as a matter of fact, even if it is not clear how. The way I think it out is, that what he is going to be inevitably works back upon him, in a world where there is no forward or backward.

You may think of the world of objects, then, as a simultaneous picture. That is what I think the mystic means when he talks about the "Now".

All the Devas and men are at work trying to create the shapes they desire, and I cannot make out whether the Logos clearly knows which of the possibilities will become actualities in the world. There I am quite a blank. I am sometimes inclined to think He does not. That great verse in the *Rg-Veda* comes into the mind : "Perchance even He knows not." All foresight is so much a matter of knowledge, however, that on the other side one is inclined to think He does—that by the sight of things at work He would

be able to calculate exactly what will be. These matters are too high for us; we cannot attain to them.

When we come to events, then we have to deal with a different kind of thing. Events are more like a drama. So far as one can see, those events are unchangeable—they are all there. It is the plan of the Logos for His world. People cannot change His plan. But who shall be in any event, *as far as one can see*, is not in the plan. What we see is a great thing stretched out before us—which seems to include the whole plan, the whole drama written by the Logos. When we drop out of that into the world of Jivas, we see them all busy at work, like ants in an ant-hill, running up from below into a bit of the plan, which then becomes their individual life, and it seems to be they who make the choice of the part of the plan they will be in, and not the Logos. It looks like a spontaneous action—as though each Jiva were choosing his part, but he chooses it according to his past; should I not rather say, he is impelled into it according to his past, by his past choices made, whereof he knew not the result?

It is quite clear that the Jiva is not exercising that choice in the lower kingdoms. It does not seem as though the Monad could exercise anything like choice there. He is sending down streams of life, but it does not seem as if these streams were directed by him. They are guided by the Hierarchies and the Devas. There is not sufficient energy of direction, not sufficient knowledge of the lower planes, to make

them take one path or the other; but with the development of the mānasic germ, when the Monad is no longer floating above, but is more definitely anchored to, his vehicles, the directive action becomes stronger.

But here is a great difficulty. As you see direction coming down from the Monad, it seems to be turned aside by all sorts of things in the sheaths, the vehicles, and to be constantly drawn away from its original direction in a hundred other directions, which are determined, not apparently by the primary direction, but by the outside attractions of the surrounding objects. The primary direction given by the Monad is being thus continually thrown out of its way by the mental, astral and physical sheath—the final expression being a resultant between these two: the attraction from outside, and the force coming down from above.

Then you see the Monad impelling towards one part or another in the great scheme; the less developed Jivas are very eager and hot and urgent, and up to a very high point of evolution, great energy is thrown into each choice, the only apparent force against that being the pain experienced in following out a particular thing. That turns the energy of the Jiva back against his will. You may find some general statements on the world-drama in the papers on "The Ideals of East and West," and "The Destinies of Nations," in *The Theosophical Review* for September and October, 1905. These papers will show you more than they will show the ordinary reader.

Through these two great pictures of objects and events we see the great crowds of individual Jivas wandering. It is just as though you might have an immense map—a raised and modelled map—and then a number of ants going about the map in several directions. You do not change the map, its mountain ranges, its valleys, its rivers ; your objects and events are all there, but your ants wander about amongst them, going this way, that way, every way, and so they come into touch with them in time, as they call it, in very different fashions. Their relations to them, they call these space, and this is continually varying ; the time and space are always measured by the consciousness of the individual ant. And so with the Jivas. There is no universal centre, common to all. All exists in relation to each, and this relation makes the world of each, so that each is, in a very real sense, his own world. The succession in which he comes across the things is, to him, time ; and the relation they bear to him is, to him, space. That changes with the vehicles in which he is working, but is always measured by the same method. There is no centre save himself.

In a very real sense, then, each has a world of his own, although all these little worlds are comprehended in the great world of the Logos.

That liberty, again, which seems to characterise them more and more as they advance, always comes up from the innermost in them, the Deity in them ; and while in the earliest stages it is manifestly Deity, in the latest stages it is also manifestly Deity, but the Deity

as the individual Jiva, which then again falls into the great stream and loses its wish to choose, by being perfectly harmonious with the One which it has recognised as Itself. Between the earliest and the latest the Deity is concealed.

In all the intermediate stages, it is just a question of appropriating one thing or another by working out one possibility or another. I cannot find anywhere by vision limits to that, except the big limits I have spoken of. But I do not therefore say there are no other limits. Reason is higher than sight, and has the deciding word. The direction of the Jiva seems to be from the centre, not from outside, and it is increasingly from the centre as evolution goes on, until that centre recognises its own root, so that its will becomes consciously the Divine Will and perfect accord is re-established, only with all the possibilities of that evolution of the Jivas unfolded, which in the beginning were only, as it were, latent.

I know that this kind of sketch will raise endless questions; I have only been trying to stimulate you into thinking by laying before you something of what I have seen; and you must understand that while the mystic is of great authority to himself in the guidance of his own life and thought, he can only be useful to other people as a sign-post; he should not claim over them any authority, and he cannot do the seeing for them. Such a description should be to you an indication of the line of study which may be fruitful if followed by yourselves, and it will only be intelligible fully to you as you do follow it for

yourselves. You cannot put life and reality into the lines suggested, except by putting yourselves into it, and beginning yourselves to see and to sense. Let me remind you—for on this point, that which I said to you last week becomes even a little more important—that you do not want, in order to appreciate and work out this, ordinary clairvoyant vision. It is no good to you for this. You only reach and perceive on this plane by the unfolding of the consciousness which can act on this plane. The ordinary clairvoyance is no good for this kind of investigation. It would be as hopeless to look for this with astral or mental sight as it would be to look for it with physical sight.

So, do not think you cannot do anything with it because you are not clairvoyant; you are likely, indeed, until you are far advanced, to grasp this better without clairvoyance than with it, for the clairvoyant will be confused by trying to read into it what he has seen on the astral or mental planes. But you cannot do anything with it without deep and continued meditation. If you will thus study, it will help you to gain an idea of the mystic consciousness, which, I say again, must always be for you an inspiration from within, and not an imposition from without.

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